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Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration

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• (1530)

[English]

The Chair (Julie Dzerowicz (Davenport, Lib.)): Good afternoon. I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number four of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format. Indeed, all of our witnesses are joining us via Zoom today. I will be introducing all of our witnesses more formally in a minute, but on behalf of the committee, I extend a warm welcome to all of you. We really appreciate your taking and making the time today.

I'm going to start off with a few general comments, just to ensure that we have a smooth running of our meeting, and then I want to provide a small update to committee members about some upcoming meetings.

Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. For those participating by video conference, click on the microphone icon to activate it, and please mute yourself when you are not speaking. For those on Zoom, at the bottom of your screen you can select the appropriate channel for interpretation: floor, English or French. For those in the room, you can use the earpiece and select the desired channel. I remind you that all comments should be addressed through the chair.

Members, please raise your hand if you wish to speak, whether participating in person or via Zoom. The clerk and I will manage the speaking order as best we can. I thank you in advance for your co-operation.

Before we begin, for your information, committee members, the minister will appear on Thursday, October 2, regarding Bill C-3. That is next Thursday, October 2. Consequently, as we have agreed, the clause-by-clause study of Bill C-3 will be held on Tuesday, October 7. We have to set a deadline for the submission of amendments to the bill. The clerk is recommending a deadline for submissions of Friday, October 3, at 12 p.m. That's to submit your amendments so that the package of amendments can be distributed 48 hours before the clause-by-clause.

Is that agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Consequently, just so everybody is on the same page, based on our calendar, the next meeting with witnesses re-

garding the international student program and study permits, after today, would be on Thursday, October 9.

Okay. We're back to why we are all here: the international student program and study permits. Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on September 16, 2025, the committee is commencing its study of the international student program and study permits.

I would like to welcome our witnesses for today's meeting. This is for our first hour. We have six witnesses: We have three in the first hour and another three in the second hour.

From the Canadian Bureau for International Education, we have Larissa Bezo, president and chief executive officer, by video conference. From the Higher Education Strategy Associates, we have Alex Usher, president. From The Dais at Toronto Metropolitan University, we have André Côté, executive director.

You will each have five minutes for your opening remarks, after which we will proceed to rounds of questions.

I invite Larissa Bezo to begin.

Larissa Bezo (President and Chief Executive Officer, Canadian Bureau for International Education): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you for this opportunity to contribute to your deliberations.

I won't mince words: The impacts of IRCC's policy changes over the past 20 months are serious and far-reaching and will be long-lasting.

Annual caps were followed by plummeting approval rates, drastically increased processing times and increased applicant requirements. We may have successfully addressed a numbers issue, but Canada is no longer competitive in attracting global talent. The international student program has lost sight of Canada's long-term growth, prosperity, labour market, research and innovation objectives. The changes represent a serious overcorrection that risks further eroding Canada's international reputation. Without action, there will be continued damage inflicted on our education institutions, labour markets, economic prospects and competitiveness. Canada needs global talent to sustain and grow our economy and to counter our aging population and declining birth rate. Canada's future prosperity and growth hinge on those who choose to study in Canada and ultimately make this country home.

We need to strategically rebuild international education—not in terms of returning to the volume of international students entering Canada before the cap, but, rather, better, smarter and with purpose, as well as ethical, sustainable and supportive of Canada's long-term national strategy, while concurrently ensuring program integrity. We have a new opportunity now to leverage the international student program to maximize the benefits for Canada in this key moment of nation building and geopolitical turmoil.

IRCC's policy changes are crushing a sector that in 2024 contributed \$38.6 billion to Canada's GDP, over 1.7% of the total. In addition, international students graduating from our institutions account for over 40% of economic class immigrants and over one-third of Canadian entrepreneurs.

Applications to our universities and colleges are plummeting. It's not surprising, given that new study permits dropped by 70% between January and June, well in excess of IRCC's goals. These measures have devastated the system, and Canada's reputation along with it. Corrosive public rhetoric, alongside constrictive policy changes, has accelerated sector decline. We are even witnessing active attacks and hate crimes against international students.

Canada's welcoming reputation has disappeared in political narratives and policy statements, and the sector is struggling. Since the fall of 2024, Canadian institutions have announced 35 site closures, 863 program suspensions and the loss of over 10,000 jobs, with many more to come. These are not fly-by-night diploma mills; our greatest institutions have experienced severely reduced application and acceptance volumes and have been forced to make difficult cuts.

Without coordinated action to attract and retain global talent, Canada risks falling short of its economic, innovation and geopolitical objectives, undermining key national strategies and nation-building projects. To rebuild a smarter, more resilient system, we need an ethical, sustainable and coordinated approach that benefits all Canadians.

To address these questions and more, in May 2024, CBIE hosted a multi-stakeholder national dialogue on international students, with over 225 organizations represented, to begin charting a path forward for the Canadian international education sector. There were four key themes that emerged.

First, Canada's education sector needs a period of government policy stability and predictability. Our global brand needs time to heal. The sector and students will recalibrate to current policy; however, it requires a predictable policy environment.

Second, we need a new narrative about international education, both at home and abroad. Domestically, the narrative needs to focus on international education's value to Canadians and why it is important. Internationally, we must focus on the quality of our education system, preparing a global workforce, and our ethical international education practices.

Third, we need a global talent strategy in support of Canada's future economic, innovation and demographic goals. A centre of excellence for international education would provide for policy innovation, research, capacity building and strategic coordination in in-

ternational education. Canada can no longer afford to risk losing global talent.

Fourth, we need to be clear that this isn't solely an immigration issue. Talent development and attraction cuts across departments and needs whole-of-government coordination: Global Affairs to align trade and diplomatic priorities, ISED to define industrial policy and Canada's research and innovation agenda, ESDC to ensure alignment with labour market and human resources development, the intergovernmental affairs secretariat to ensure provincial and territorial engagement, and Public Safety to address security considerations.

● (1535)

International education is a key part of Canada's strengths, and an even more important part of its future. CBIE and our members look forward to working collaboratively with government, community and industries to realize a bold, renewed vision for international education in a global knowledge economy.

Thank you for the opportunity to share.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Bezo. That was a little over five minutes, but you did an excellent job.

It's very nice to see you, Mr. Usher. Welcome.

You now have five minutes to speak.

[Translation]

Alex Usher (President, Higher Education Strategy Associates): Thank you, Madam Chair.

● (1540)

[English]

Thanks for the invitation to appear at the committee.

I thought it would be helpful to say, just for the sake of clarity here, that when we talk about the international student program, we're really talking about three different things. It's not always clear to me that everybody is talking about the same thing.

There are student visas, and we've had these since we began handing out visas of any kind. I don't think it should be particularly controversial to say that if a student wants to spend their money at a Canadian institution, they should be allowed to do so. That seems uncontroversial to me. We could talk about what the conditions are on that visa. We can talk about what the right length of stay is, what work rights are associated with it and so forth, but if people want to buy an education here, let them buy it.

The second is postgraduate work visas. We don't talk very much about these, but these are the visas that allow students to stay for a period of a few months after their studies. These were not really a thing even 20 or 25 years ago, but they were a way that many countries, including the U.K. and Australia, which are two of our biggest competitors, used to make their institutions more attractive to international students. If you want our institutions to be competitive, you have to start thinking about what that looks like, and you can't be too far away from global norms.

The third one—and this is the one that I think has gotten everyone in a tizzy over the last five years or so—is the link to permanent residency, which I believe Canada introduced in 2007. It was early in the Harper years. We were the only country to say that you could go from a degree, a certificate or a postgraduate visa to some kind of path toward permanent residency. We did that because 20 years ago, among the top issues in public policy around immigration was the idea that immigrants were not integrated into the labour force fast enough. They didn't have Canadian experience. The idea, again from the Harper PMO, was, “Hey, why don't we have a certain fraction of our immigrants have Canadian experience before they get here?” That was the idea. That is where this path to citizenship was born.

That kind of makes sense. That logic still makes a certain amount of sense. Look, all of this worked until the moment when it didn't. A couple of years ago, we got this toxic mix of five things. We had institutions that had not initially been considered the target of the permanent residency program realizing they could monetize it. When this policy was adopted in 2007, people were mostly thinking about universities. It didn't occur to them that colleges would come along and monetize this policy.

You had provincial governments—mainly, but not exclusively, Conservative—that realized that if institutions could monetize this policy, Canadian governments didn't need to subsidize universities and colleges so much. This is great. Lots of people did that.

You then had a Liberal federal government that, mainly because of COVID-era inflation, thought that turning international students into de facto temporary foreign workers was a great idea. We upped the work permit hours from 20 hours a week to 40 hours a week. Guess what happened. From all over the world, students started flooding in because we now had by far the most generous set of conditions across those three programs of anyone.

Then, as soon as everyone realized that things weren't going too well, that we had too many students and that it was affecting housing prices and that kind of stuff, everyone started finger pointing. This wasn't our country's finest hour. We could have done better. We should have done better.

What we ended up with was a federal government that barely understood what was going on, lashing out, acting alone, doing anything it could to bring the numbers down with only the barest understanding of the system it was regulating. Of course, we ended up with a dog's breakfast. However, I think it's not so much a product of the policies. Yes, you can point to certain policies for certain actions like that, but the real causes here are that, one, we underinvest in operational and data systems, which leaves decision-makers poorly informed and the system as a whole insecure, and two, we have almost no instinct anymore for co-operative federalism. This was a clear case where governments should have been talking to one another, and they weren't. They should have been including institutions, as well. We have brutally siloed decision-making.

The Chair: Mr. Usher, you're going to have to wrap up in 30 seconds.

Alex Usher: Okay.

We also have difficulty having complicated, joined-up policy discussions when issues cross policy fields, because so much of our policy-making involves ministers and their political staff making policy on the fly and behind closed doors.

As you make your decisions and as we reflect on this national failure, think about how to solve those systemic issues in policy-making, and not just come up with how to make the right policy. Absent really basic changes in the way we make decisions in complex policy areas, the nature of the next crisis might be different, but the basic dilemma of poor policy-making will remain.

● (1545)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Usher.

[*Translation*]

André Côté, you have the floor.

[*English*]

André Côté (Executive Director, The Dais, Toronto Metropolitan University): Thank you, Chair, and thank you to the committee for inviting me to speak.

My name is André Côté, and I am the executive director of The Dais, which is a think tank at Toronto Metropolitan University. We're focused on public policy at the intersection of technology, education and democracy. In a past life, I was a senior adviser to an Ontario higher education minister, so I have some experience in government on these and other related issues.

We, at The Dais, have been doing a bunch of work on the international education file over the last couple of years. We launched a project shortly after the original January 2024 announcements. It was kind of like the times before Miller, before the announcement, and the times after the announcement. What we wanted to focus on was not just the immediate turmoil—we'll call it that—in the wake of it, but also how we think about the long-term future of the system in Canada. We hosted round tables with a whole range of players across the country. We published a report earlier this year, so I'll hit a few points there.

To begin, I commend the committee, first—and that's where Larissa started—for keeping this issue on the agenda. Frankly, there were a bunch of reforms last year, and it's like a half-completed project, so it's important that we come back to it. I also commend you for the kind of systems lens you're taking, because that's what it is. It's a very complex system, so it's good to have good starting points.

The first point is that we need to focus on fixing Canada's international education system for the future, rather than assigning blame for the past. You're going to hear from many speakers who have expressed great frustration and anger about the reforms last year; however, we have to be honest with ourselves: Many things contributed to what was essentially the failure of the system in a variety of ways that other speakers have spoken to.

With the federal government and the way the reforms were executed, sure, you can point to some problems, but the provinces were hugely complicit, some provinces in particular. Universities and colleges themselves, many of which pursued really aggressive growth strategies, also incented that. There were also recruitment agents and other players. There were many who contributed. Instead of dwelling on that, let's focus our energies on fixing the system to the benefit of Canada and doing right by foreign students here. That's the first point.

Second, to get into the reforms themselves, we have been broadly supportive of the previous government's core reforms to reduce and cap the size of the program and tie it to the broader immigration levels and planned targets for temporary residents; to do things like tightening up postgraduate work permits and eliminating the private partnerships, which were quite egregious even dating back to my days in the Ontario government; to put more focus on integrity and accountability mechanisms with designated learning institutions, and some other aspects, smart minor changes, such as the changes in working hours, which someone mentioned.

That being said, the federal reforms overstepped into some domains that are better managed by the provinces or the institutions, or maybe not at all. I would point to two of them. One would be the postgraduate work permit eligibility for colleges being tied to in-demand programs. Basically, out of IRCC, you're sort of dictating a list of 1,000 programs. Someone referred to a dog's breakfast. I think that's what that is. That one has been very challenging. The real question is, is that something the federal government should be doing? There were also changes for graduate students, including the cap and limiting work eligibility for spouses. Simply put, these are areas that the IRCC is not well equipped to intervene in. It pushes into provincial jurisdiction. To us, it's better to either scrap it or delegate it to provinces and territories.

We have many other pieces around the policy in our report, but I'll close here.

The policies themselves have not changed much since the last Parliament, or with this new government, but the landscape has changed in two very critical ways, I would say. The first is that we've come to fully appreciate the extent of the damage to brand Canada from the crisis in terms of our international reputation and in terms of what it has meant for study permit applications.

We've seen the projections for 2025, for example, not even meeting the hugely reduced targets. Even more worrying is that we've seen the numbers of new study permit submissions fall dramatically. Larissa made the point that it requires a concerted effort to fix this. It's across FPTs and the post-secondary sector. We need a team Canada approach here.

The flip side is that, while our brand has taken a big hit, there's a global shift toward anti-immigration sentiment, closed borders, and in particular what's happened in the U.S. with the terrifying ICE raids, and now with this \$100,000—

• (1550)

The Chair: Mr. Côté, please wrap up.

André Côté: Okay.

The visa piece gives us a big opportunity.

Just to leave off where some of the other speakers did, refocused efforts on international education—to attract talent into a smaller but better system, but also to attract other world-class graduate, postgraduate and academic faculty into our universities and into our economy—form part of the global skills strategy approach.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Mr. Côté.

Thanks to all of you for the excellent beginning to our conversation over the next hour.

Before we begin our first round of questions, I want to remind everyone of two things. First, for our witnesses, the first set of three questioners in a round will have six minutes for questions. It's important for you to know this, because we have a lot of questions. We're hoping you can respond to them with haste. I wanted to mention that. The second round is generally five minutes. I usually say whether it will be five minutes or six minutes or two and a half minutes so that you will have an idea of how long it will be.

Just as a reminder to everyone in the room, let's allow the opportunity for our witnesses to respond to the questions. Thank you.

Our first questioner will be Mr. Redekopp, for six minutes.

Brad Redekopp (Saskatoon West, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for being here today.

I'll start with you, Mr. Usher. In 2022, federal public servants warned the immigration department about a lack of housing. This was in an article that came out: "The deputy minister, among others, was warned in 2022 that housing construction had not kept up with the pace of population growth." You said in your 2023 report that "there are increasing pressures from communities around the number of international students being recruited in the wake of various housing crises."

Did you raise these alarm bells around housing with the government at that time?

Alex Usher: I'm sorry. Is that question for me?

The Chair: It's for you, Mr. Usher.

Alex Usher: Okay.

I don't speak to the government very often. I don't work for the Government of Canada. I've never had a contract with Immigration. I write a blog. If you call that "raising" it, I suppose, yes, I did, but in no other way.

Brad Redekopp: All right. Thanks.

Mr. Côté, did you see this housing shortage problem coming in 2022?

André Côté: I can't really recall with any certainty whether I did.

Brad Redekopp: Basically, we had a government that got advice. People could see this coming, and yet it chose to do nothing. In 2022-23, when the student population was beginning to explode, did you see any evidence that the government was talking with colleges about concerns over housing capacity?

André Côté: Is that one for me?

The Chair: Yes, Mr. Côté, it's for you.

André Côté: To answer that directly, I did not see any evidence. Honestly, I feel that the way this unfolded.... Coming out of the pandemic, I think we had basically 30% growth year over year for two straight years. There was this moment, later in 2023, when it was announced that the number of international students had topped a million, and jaws dropped, frankly. Honestly, I think there was a bit of a lack of oversight in the growth of the system. I'm not sure if it was straight on the housing issue, but I think the housing then became an issue, as we saw the pressures there.

Brad Redekopp: Thank you, Mr. Côté. I think you're right that jaws dropped. I think it was quite shocking that the government had no clue what was going on there.

I'll go to you, Ms. Bezo. Your 2023 annual report did not mention anything about housing shortages. Did any of your member institutions raise the housing shortage issue with you?

Larissa Bezo: As we were seeing the growth that Mr. Côté spoke about coming out of the pandemic—substantive growth, year over year—we were certainly seeing some pressure start to build in certain communities. We saw institutions taking initiative to engage with stakeholders within their communities and to look at these issues.

Brad Redekopp: Did you raise this issue with the government in any way?

Larissa Bezo: We were certainly having discussions with government broadly in terms of student flows and the overall direction of the program, and broadly in terms of the policy pieces. We were starting to see pressures build in some communities. We saw that there needed to be further conversation on these issues.

However, we warned very explicitly in our submissions to IRCC, in their consultations on the future direction of immigration, that caps were not the best way to approach this. We needed to engage with provinces, the federal government and our institutions to look at a much more tailored and measured way to address some of the pressures we were starting to see build.

• (1555)

Brad Redekopp: That's interesting. You did warn the government about this, and they chose not to act on it. Eventually, of course, they had to, but in those days they didn't.

I want to talk about immigration consultants, briefly. A regulated international student immigration adviser, or RISIA, is a special type of immigration consultant. I think you know about those. Their purpose, of course, is to encourage international students to come to Canada.

Ms. Bezo, do you agree that immigration consultants are partly responsible for the explosion in international students in Canada?

Larissa Bezo: The role of the regulated international student immigration advisers isn't to promote Canada; their role is to provide explicit immigration advice on a broad range of immigration matters related to students. That could be issues related to study permits or postgraduate work permits. RISIAs are not involved in the promotion of opportunities in Canada. They are there to support students, specifically as it relates to immigration, advising within the framework of our Immigration and Refugee Protection Act.

Brad Redekopp: Practically, how that looks at a college is that their job is to try to get as many people into the college as possible. Is that true?

Larissa Bezo: Actually, they're there to ensure that the institution is meeting its quality assurance commitments and to manage integrity challenges with respect to study permit applications and other immigration-related issues. They are really there to support in a very transparent and direct way.

Brad Redekopp: Thank you.

I just want to point out—and you can correct me if I'm wrong—that you do receive about \$4,000 for every one of these who is trained. Is that correct?

Larissa Bezo: CBIE has a role to play in preparing international student advisers to write the entry-to-practice exam to become designated.

Brad Redekopp: I noticed that, in your introduction, you spoke glowingly and used the word “ethical” quite a number of times, but I didn't actually hear you say anything about the youth job crisis that we have in Canada. It would seem to me that if you lose students from one source—in this case, international students.... In the GTA alone, there are about 200,000 unemployed youth. It's approaching 20%. What are you doing to try to attract those youth to your colleges to get them trained up?

The Chair: Could you give a quick response, please?

Larissa Bezo: Yes.

Our institutions, in their day-to-day work, broadly, in terms of their education offerings, are very much focused on aligning programming to support the evolving labour market needs in Canada and in our communities.

We've certainly seen, with the latest recalibrations around the PGWP, a further alignment to ensure that our graduates are, in fact, job-ready. We are hearing from employers about positions that they still struggle to fill, absent both domestic and international talent.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Ms. Bezo.

Thank you, Mr. Redekopp.

We now proceed with six minutes for Mr. Fragiskatos.

Peter Fragiskatos (London Centre, Lib.): Chair, thank you very much.

Thank you to our witnesses.

Ms. Bezo, I'll begin with you. You made a number of interesting comments in your presentation, but I was particularly taken when you said that there is a need to get away from “corrosive public rhetoric”. What do you mean by that?

Larissa Bezo: I think that over the course of these last 18 to 20 months, we have seen a considerable amount of scapegoating and blame directed towards international students who have chosen to come to study at our institutions. I think we've seen very divisive language that separates those students, rather than taking a much more inclusive approach of wanting to welcome them and to speak about ways in which we can integrate them into our communities and into the broader Canadian society.

From our perspective, in a situation where Canada relies on both domestic and global talent to secure our future prosperity, we need to take a more inclusive approach that values the contributions of international students. They are our future builders, planners, engineers and entrepreneurs, as are our Canadian youth, and we need to find a balanced approach to engage and nurture their integration.

Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you.

I know that your expertise is in the area of international students, but can I go one step further and ask if you would extend that com-

ment about a corrosive narrative that's out there to immigration issues and immigration policy in general?

Larissa Bezo: I think we're seeing a rise in that kind of corrosive rhetoric, broadly, in a global sense. I just returned from a global summit in London, meeting with my peers. We are seeing these kinds of challenges, given the migration trends and given the mounting pressures. I think this is a broad discussion where we need to really focus on where we're going as a country and on the message we want to send to the world in terms of being welcome and seeing the value of our youth—all of our youth.

• (1600)

Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you very much.

Mr. Côté, I appreciated your presentation as well, particularly on the need to focus on the future and not dwell on the past. Clearly, there was an imbalance, to say the least, with the numbers, as you and other witnesses have noted and as this committee has understood very well.

Of the various ideas that you put forward, sir, can you provide us with your key recommendation, for this committee and for the government, on the international student program?

André Côté: I think there are a few places where the federal government can roll back some aspects of what it did, where it overextended in some of the places I talked about, such as for post-graduate work permits and for colleges around graduate students. Again, broadly, I felt as though we had a demand-driven system that was a little bit out of control and these types of reforms were needed to pull it back in.

With regard to Alex's point, the collaborative federalism is huge. This is a system jointly administered with provinces and also, critically, with institutions and various other players, like third party recruiters, so there needs to be a team approach. I think the federal government needs to engage with the provinces on how they're doing their part around oversight of designated learning institutions. I think the federal government can say, “Listen, PTs, if you're showing us that you're stepping up to the plate there, maybe we'll be able to pull back on some of the areas that you feel are overly restrictive for you or for your institutions.”

I think the brand Canada piece is really huge. We have an opportunity now, if we get our act together and do it as a team Canada thing. Looking to the future, let's work together on that, as opposed to being upset about our collective failures in the past.

Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you very much.

On the topic of co-operative federalism, federal responsibility and provincial responsibility, we haven't talked about the provinces. I take the point you just raised about the provinces, but it seems to me that tuition is a key issue here.

Mr. Usher, this question is for you. In a comment that you made to the ICEF Monitor—this is an online page that focuses on international students and international education policy generally—about recent changes made by IRCC, you said:

We're talking about hundreds of program closures and all those high-cost programs in health and trades are 100% on the table, because the provincial government simply does not fund these programs at an adequate level. They've been cross subsidized for years by international students. It's going to be a program apocalypse, one that provincial governments are completely unprepared to handle because international student fees have allowed them to stay in denial about the extent of their own underfunding over the past decade.

You made that comment in specific reference to the Government of Ontario, but there are other provinces that it could apply to.

Could you speak about the need for provincial governments to step up funding with respect to tuition? While colleges were involved in this—and universities, obviously, but particularly colleges—I think they are getting a particularly bad rap, considering the fact that tuition was not there for them. It certainly was not there for them as it was a number of years ago. If you compare provincial education funding for colleges and universities in the early 1990s to where it's at today, you will see that there has been a dramatic decline, and that opened the door for colleges and universities to look to international students.

Could you provide a quick comment on that?

The Chair: You have 30 seconds, please.

Alex Usher: It's particularly a problem in Ontario. Compared to the rest of the country, Ontario spends, per student, less than half of what the rest of the country pays for college students. That was what started the move to look for these alternative sources of funding, like international students. There were a lot of colleges that went far beyond that. They got cut by 25% and then grabbed another 400% or 500% with international student tuition.

Yes, that does have to be.... It's part of the equation, and—

• (1605)

The Chair: Mr. Usher, I have to cut you off. I'm very sorry, but we're at the end of the extra 30 seconds. We've gone over.

When you respond next, you can continue with your response.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, you have the floor for six minutes.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe (Lac-Saint-Jean, BQ): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I thank the witnesses who are here today to take part in our study of this important motion.

I also want to thank my colleagues who voted in favour of the motion and decided to make it the first thing the committee will study this fall.

You're well aware that international students are of crucial importance to Quebec, especially to universities outside of major centres. Unfortunately, there are problems with IRCC's permit system. That's why I moved this motion. The goal is to identify problems, but the motion also indicates that we want to find solutions to improve the system.

My first questions are for Ms. Bezo.

Ms. Bezo, you represent Quebec universities outside of Montreal, such as the Université du Québec en Outaouais and the Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières.

I imagine you're familiar with the process an international student has to go through to come study in Quebec.

Are you?

[*English*]

Larissa Bezo: I lost the audio connection. I did not hear the question. I apologize.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I expect the timekeeper will take that problem into account.

I'll repeat my question.

Ms. Bezo, I imagine you're familiar with the process an international student has to go through to come study in Quebec.

Are you?

[*English*]

Larissa Bezo: Broadly, yes.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: As you know, international students who want to study here need a Quebec acceptance certificate and a university admission letter. They also need a study permit, which is issued by IRCC.

To your knowledge, which level of government makes the final decision to issue a study permit?

Is it IRCC?

[*English*]

Larissa Bezo: Yes. Certainly when it comes to review of study permits, that is happening at the level of the department, with officers reviewing those files. That is correct.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: So, it's not up to the provinces or universities to do criminal record checks or make sure people have had a medical exam.

Is that correct?

[*English*]

Larissa Bezo: Our institutions are involved at the level of assessing academic suitability as part of that application process. The issues related to security, health, etc., which fall within the immigration framework, are outside the scope of our institutions.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Perfect. Thank you.

Suppose there was a security breach and someone with criminal intentions posed as a student and ended up here with a study permit. Would you agree that the federal government would be to blame for an inadequate security screening?

In this kind of situation, if the federal government were to blame universities for this even though the only authority responsible for allowing people to enter the country is the government, what would you think?

At worst, would it be lying? At best, would it be acting in bad faith?

[English]

Larissa Bezo: Our institutions are very much committed to ensuring program integrity. However, the scope of their role vis-à-vis the responsibilities of IRCC and CBSA differs quite significantly.

Our institutions remain vigilant. If we become aware of issues, we have an obligation to alert the government. However, the scope of program integrity within the parameters you've just described certainly falls outside the purview of our institutions explicitly.

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: In your presentation, you talked about Canadian learning institutions' international reputation. I think that's extremely important.

How badly is our post-secondary learning institutions' image tarnished on the international scene now?

[English]

Larissa Bezo: It has been severely damaged. We cannot speak about “puppy mills” and not damage the perceived quality of Canada's education system.

Also, absent explicit narrative coming from the Government of Canada to contextualize the changes, the assumption is simply that our quality has decreased and that we are no longer interested in hosting international students, and that does a tremendous disservice to Canada when we require that global talent to secure our future prosperity.

• (1610)

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I didn't take a lot of time off this summer because I had to intervene to ensure that a number of French students got their study permits. In August, despite the fact that universities in Quebec and France have a protocol in place, there was a 12-week delay in processing applications from French students.

Meanwhile, as we found out last week, an international crime ring is using the study permit system to come to Canada and commit crimes.

I think it is ridiculous that genuine students who want to come work here are subjected to these long delays. The same goes for universities in the regions, as I said, that need these students to support their programs, while criminals are taking advantage of loopholes in the immigration system.

What are your thoughts on that?

[English]

Larissa Bezo: We're seeing the immediate after-effects of the policy changes. There is clearly work to be done in terms of that recalibration and how it is playing out at the level of study permit

assessment. We are actively engaging with IRCC to work through this so that it doesn't serve to deter genuine students from pursuing their academic studies in our institutions, both within Quebec and within the rest of the country.

The Chair: You have 30 seconds.

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I want to reiterate that we're looking for solutions.

The federal government's latest reforms relating to international students are a step in the wrong direction.

The Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration won't have time to discuss everything, but I strongly recommend that all witnesses submit written documents to help us and help our analysts draft a report that will improve the study permit system.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you so much, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

Now we go to our second round, which is for five minutes.

We'll start with Mr. Ma.

Michael Ma (Markham—Unionville, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

My first question is addressed to Mr. Côté.

In January 2025, you published a report entitled “Where to From Here”, which focused on the international higher education in Canada. In theme 2, you explained that the large number of students in general, business and other low-alignment programs struggled to transition to high-demand occupations under postgraduate work permits and often failed to receive permanent residency.

If international student caps had been established earlier, would this problem have existed?

André Côté: It might have existed to some extent, but I think the challenge was that there was a huge increase in the number of students. The largest share of that increase was in college programs, and a huge proportion of those college programs were enrolling students in these kinds of general business certificate programs or other types of credentials. There was just a very low likelihood they would have labour market success afterwards. I certainly think it became a numbers game.

Also, I think that part of the challenge on the recruitment side was that a promise was made to many of these students that this would put them on an immigration track in Canada, when the simple fact was that there were not enough permanent residency slots to accommodate the huge volume of students we were letting into the country. I think many felt as though it was a bit of a raw deal. We kind of led them astray.

Michael Ma: Thank you.

As you mentioned, a large number of student permits were issued. Were you or other organizations required to report on the enrolment status and ongoing enrolment and work permit...that they were able to gainfully be employed?

André Côté: We were not. We're a centre within a university that would have a division that would focus on international education. A lot of that data—Alex is typically the data expert—would be reported to IRCC. A lot of that data was made public. It was the analysis of that data that started to point to some of those trends.

• (1615)

Michael Ma: Thank you.

The following question is for Mr. Usher.

You published, also in 2025, “The State of Postsecondary Education in Canada”. In it, you mentioned that, for both universities and colleges, “business’ studies are the largest single category” of enrolments “due mainly to this being the field of choice for the international students”. A few pages later, you write, “At the college level...nearly 50% of all students enrolled in business programs.” Beside this statement is a chart where I see that in the 2022-23 academic year, there were over 90,000 international students enrolled in college business programs, and close to 60,000 in university business programs.

In your opinion, would these numbers have been the same if the international student caps had been established earlier?

Alex Usher: That's a good question. I don't know.

Business programs are the cheapest ones for universities to put on. One reason is that they require the lowest levels of language skills, frankly, from international students. They're the cheapest to put on. I think that even with caps, you would likely see a lot of people in those programs, because there's a lot of incentive to build them that way. Would it be as high? Maybe not, but it would still be high.

Michael Ma: Would it be fair to say that these numbers, as far as you know, were uncontrolled? There were no caps, and they were just free-flowing as the applications come through.

Alex Usher: There were no caps because the provincial.... Most of those college numbers are in Ontario. The provincial government, on three occasions between 2019 and 2024, loosened the regulations so that colleges could accept more and more students. Colleges said, “You won't give us the money, so let us go get it ourselves.” They did.

The Ford government, in the 905 zone, was throwing gasoline on a fire when it came to permitting institutions to bring in as many students as possible and as cheaply as possible, and that meant, in many cases, putting them in business programs.

Michael Ma: In that scenario, were there considerations given to housing issues and employment issues, as well as the impact on local youth in these areas?

The Chair: You have 25 seconds, please.

Alex Usher: You'd have to ask the Ford government, but to my knowledge, no.

Michael Ma: What I gather is that, due to these no-cap situations, institutions were allowed to admit as many as would come,

without due considerations for housing, health care and the other aspects of having these students here.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Ma.

Next, we have five minutes for Mr. Zuberi.

Sameer Zuberi (Pierrefonds—Dollard, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to the witnesses for being here today.

I'd like to start off with Mr. Usher.

In your last point, you were speaking about co-operative federalism and a siloed approach. While you complete that thought, I'd also like you to opine on or share with us your thoughts on the IRCC review of the international student program that happened in 2022-23 in consultation with the provinces and territories and stakeholders. As you answer and complete that part of your testimony, could you just consider what I mentioned in terms of that review, which found, at the end, that there were unsustainable numbers undermining the program's integrity?

Alex Usher: I'll be honest; I don't remember that review. I mean, there's been so much going on and everybody has.... I don't really know specifically what that was. There was—

Sameer Zuberi: That's fine. Could you just complete your thought on that point?

Alex Usher: I talked to a lot of provincial deputy ministers in the immediate aftermath of the January 2024 announcement by Minister Miller that he was putting on caps, and nobody could get a straight answer out of the ministry about how many spots were going to each province. They couldn't get straight answers about why the numbers didn't appear to be proportional, as we had been promised. They couldn't get straight answers about how fast this would be done.

The decision to tell all the provinces that they had to copy the Quebec system of letters of attestation, which might have been a good idea, was done with no consultation. The provinces were to put it together on the fly in about eight or 10 weeks. I mean, it was brutal. That's not the way you treat partners. Also, it goes the other way. Provinces.... My example was of the Premier of Ontario spreading gasoline on a fire. You don't do that.

We just don't have a way of talking about issues before they build into crises, and I'm not sure we have a way to talk to each other after crises. We're bad at coordination. Everybody likes to do things on their own. They don't like to share credit or to be seen to be indecisive by talking to another partner. It's just a corrosive way of doing politics.

• (1620)

Sameer Zuberi: I appreciate what you're saying, and I understand that you might not, as you've said, be aware of all the consultations that do happen, including the one I referred to.

I want to shift gears now and go back to you, Mr. Côté. You mentioned those who have already come into Canada under the social contract that if one studies, there is a pathway to PR, essentially. They are here right now, and we now have tightened things up, understandably. We've tightened things up, and they find themselves without that expected avenue to PR.

Do you have any suggested solutions for us in order to honour that social contract for those already in Canada, who have studied under the expectation that they would enter into PR at some point?

André Côté: Honestly, I do not have great solutions for you, because the challenge is that you have this whole wave of students who came in during that boom, and the rules of the game were changed while they were here. Maybe they were towards the end of their studies, or maybe they were already post-studies, on a post-graduate work permit, but they had had some signals about the direction of our immigration system, and that changed pretty abruptly. We're now operating a system in which there will be fewer spaces available.

I think it's pretty understandable that they felt like the rug was pulled out from under them. On the international brand front, I think these were the types of things we were seeing in foreign markets. In India, for example, people on Reddit message boards were literally talking about how Canada pulled the rug out from under them. These are the things that will linger.

Sameer Zuberi: That is an issue, certainly, and it is a bit hard to control, but do you think there is a level of social contract that we did have with those who came here?

André Côté: I do, yes. These are not just dollar signs in front of us; these are human beings. Also, these are people who we're hopeful will come and potentially become residents in Canada or be ambassadors for Canada when they go back home, so I think that needs to be part of our thoughts.

Sameer Zuberi: To the other witnesses, just give me a yes or no.

Do you also believe this is a social contract, yes or no?

Alex Usher: It would be nice to honour our commitments, but if you make stupid commitments, maybe you don't have to keep them.

The Chair: Okay, thank you. That is five minutes.

Next, we have two and a half minutes for Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, please.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Ms. Bezo, can you give the committee examples of how recent changes to the international student program have impacted graduate research in your institutions?

I've been hearing a lot about this, and I'd like to hear what you have to say about it.

[*English*]

Larissa Bezo: The impact has been profound. The committee may recall that in the first year of the cap, 2024, graduate-level studies were excluded from the cap. That being said, we saw significant declines in international talent at the graduate level coming in-

to our institutions. International talent plays a very key role in our laboratories, driving a lot of the research that happens at our research-intensive institutions, and a significant portion of that talent.... We were seeing declines of 25%, and even greater than 25%, within those graduate programs as a result of the brand damage that came from the first year of the cap.

The impact has been very significant. In a very competitive global environment, that is a significant risk for Canada.

• (1625)

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Sorry to interrupt, but I don't have a lot of time.

I know your institutions have been impacted, but how has society in general been impacted by the fact that basic research in our universities is taking a hit, as they say?

[*English*]

Larissa Bezo: Our empty labs don't allow us to generate research that benefits Canadian society or the broader global community. It's a tremendous loss, and it will take years to rebuild.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Monsieur Brunelle-Duceppe.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I thank all the witnesses for being with us today.

[*English*]

The Chair: We have five minutes left for this round, and we have two more members. Next is Mr. Davies for two and a half minutes, and then Mr. Fragiskatos for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Davies, go ahead.

Fred Davies (Niagara South, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Throughout this testimony, the witnesses have talked about multi-level responsibility, and I can't help thinking that, after the collapse of the program and the impact it's had across the country, it's a bit of Monday-morning quarterbacking for everybody involved. Hindsight is 20/20.

I'm concerned that colleges and universities over this summer have laid off over 10,000 people. Every university in the minister's riding is posting deficits. While we may have been tightening up on things, Mr. Côté, would you agree that these layoffs are fundamentally a result of the sudden shift in the federal program?

André Côté: It's a tough one, because the growth was concentrated in certain places. You've seen major problems at Ontario colleges, because Ontario colleges were the ones that so dramatically over-indexed. You've seen a little bit of that in other parts of the country.

The other aspect comes back to where Alex was earlier, which is that you also have the chronic underfunding of these institutions at the provincial level and constraints on domestic tuition, so there's a gradual ramp-up in the challenge, and this was a tipping point for certain institutions. As much as it stinks to close campuses and lay off staff, I also look at all this and say we had a system that grew far too big for its britches. You can't continue to employ the same number of people if you're not teaching the same number of students. It was a bit of a reckoning that had to happen.

Fred Davies: Thank you, Mr. Côté.

I don't have much time here.

I understand and appreciate your comment here, but the impact is on post-secondary institutions across the country. Are you aware of any post-secondary colleges or universities that are on the verge of collapse in the country over the next couple of years?

André Côté: The Ontario government most recently dealt with the Laurentian University situation, which was related to a variety of other things. Interestingly, they were less over-indexed on the international student front.

I haven't heard of examples of others that are on the verge of collapse, although I do know, just from conversations with some folks in the Ontario government, that there are some they are looking at but not, obviously, publicly talking about.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Côté. Thank you, Mr. Davies.

Mr. Fragiskatos, you have two and a half minutes.

Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you, Chair.

Mr. Usher, you helped put matters into context here today. For example, in your initial presentation you talked about a policy put in place in 2007—a link to permanent residency. You said that colleges could come along and monetize the policy as a result. Do you include within that the diploma mills, for lack of a better phrase? Would you include those types of colleges in this, those that are not reputable and were a big part of this problem?

Alex Usher: All of those mills—I hate that term—were teaching the public college curriculum—every last one of them. I know people hate when they see the word “private” in front of “education”. They just assume things are bad. Every single one of them was delivering a public sector education. Some of them were doing it better than others. We don't know, because the provincial government declined to actually have any quality assessment processes for these things, which was a disaster. We could have solved lots of problems with that.

Were public colleges, via the use of public-private partnerships, monetizing the system? Absolutely, it was 100% what they were they doing.

• (1630)

Peter Fragiskatos: I use that term for lack of a better term. The point is taken on the narrative.

Mr. Côté, you talked about the postgraduate worker program, and you gave a specific recommendation on what needs to change. It sounds like you're calling for a decentralized approach, such that labour market needs in particular regions are recognized and deci-

sions are made on that basis, rather than a 30,000-foot view taken by the federal government.

Do I understand your argument correctly?

André Côté: Yes, I think that's right. That type of intervention was probably designed to respond to what Mr. Ma was talking about in terms of this over-indexation around things like those general business programs. I think the challenge is that IRCC, in terms of availability of economic data to link to where the labour market is headed, will probably be challenged in the first place. Also, in terms of regional or provincial development, the provinces are probably better equipped to understand the types of in-demand fields that they want to be directing to.

My view would be to either do away with that or push it down to the provinces.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Côté.

Thank you, Mr. Fragiskatos.

That concludes our first round of witnesses and testimony for this study today. I want to give a huge thanks to all of our witnesses. That was excellent. Thank you so much for your time and your patience during this hour.

We will suspend for five minutes so the witnesses can leave. We will come back with the second panel.

• (1630)

(Pause)

• (1635)

The Chair: Welcome back, everyone.

Good afternoon to all of our panellists. Thank you for being here today.

I will be formally introducing you in a few minutes. First, I would like to make a few comments for your benefit, just to remind you of a few things. Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. If you are participating by Zoom, click on the microphone icon to activate your mic. Please mute yourself when you're not speaking. At the bottom of your screen, you can select the appropriate channel for interpretation: floor, English or French. As a reminder, all comments should be addressed through the chair.

I would now like to welcome our witnesses for the second panel.

From Seneca Polytechnic, we have David Agnew, president. From U15 Canada, we have Robert Asselin, chief executive officer. From Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières, we have Christian Blanchette, president.

You each have up to five minutes for opening remarks, after which we will proceed with rounds of questions. Just to remind everyone, in terms of rounds of questions, I'll mention how many minutes you have for the question period, just so you know how much time you have to answer. As you know, the members have lots of questions, so please be as quick and precise with your answers as possible. Thank you.

We will start with Mr. Agnew from Seneca Polytechnic.

You have five minutes, please.

• (1640)

David Agnew (President, Seneca Polytechnic): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Thank you for the invitation from the committee to appear before you in your review of the international student program.

Seneca Polytechnic has campuses in Toronto, King City, Markham and Peterborough and has a long history in international education. In addition to academic partnerships with institutions around the world, we've had many student and faculty exchanges, done international development work, delivered corporate training overseas and recruited thousands of international students over the decades.

I'm particularly proud of our responsible approach to geographic diversity in our recruitment, with a cap of 30% of our international student body from any one country. Seneca has routinely had students from 120 or more countries on campus.

We're a comprehensive polytechnic that has programs across the disciplines, many of them subject to accreditation and quality standards set by organizations such as Transport Canada, the College of Nurses of Ontario, engineering bodies, the Canadian Veterinary Medical Association and many others.

Our degrees are reviewed by the Postsecondary Education Quality Assessment Board and other credentials by the Ontario College Quality Assurance Service. We have industry advisory committees for every program, which ensures that we are responsive to labour market needs.

Some of the leading programs that have attracted international students over the years are in health care, early childhood education, aviation, advanced manufacturing, information technology and, of course, business.

We're known for our work in bringing artificial intelligence technologies into our classrooms, services and operations. We recently launched our very first master's degree, and it is in AI.

Investments in curriculum development, lab equipment, mental health services, work-integrated learning, a housing office, applied research projects, tutoring, modernizing campuses and more are ways we support our domestic and international students and set them up for success in their careers.

Seneca, like virtually every other post-secondary institution in Canada, has seen the number of overseas applicants fall since the January 2024 announcement of changes to the ISP. We are also experiencing steep drops in approval rates for those who do want to come to Canada. Let me share with you some numbers.

Last year, 2024, there was a 45% decline in study permit approvals, which was well beyond IRCC's stated target of a 35% reduction. In the first half of this year, study permit approval rates in Ontario have fallen from 64% of applicants to 25%. This is, of course, on a much smaller base of applicants. For Seneca, across our international programs, the number of applications for the fall

fell more than 80% in two years, from nearly 81,000 two years ago to less than 15,000 this year.

Let me address the asylum seeker issue, which I know is of interest to the committee. I learned about this issue from a media story, not through any official channels. I wish I could shed more light on what is behind the numbers, but I don't know any more than what I read and hear in the public domain. From an institutional perspective, let me just say that it makes no sense for us financially or reputationally to recruit a student who we know wants to claim asylum status in Canada.

We offered to the last IRCC minister to work together and share data to better understand the issue, and the same offer has been extended by our national association, Colleges and Institutes Canada. Unfortunately, so far, those offers have not been taken up. We stand ready to collaborate to address this issue.

Looking forward rather than reliving the past, I would like to offer some suggestions for the future direction of the ISP. We need much closer consultation with provinces, territories and the post-secondary system about any proposed changes to the ISP, including to the list of programs that are eligible for PGWPs. The roller coaster of policy changes during the last 21 months or so has taken its toll on Canada's reputation, and we need more predictability for all involved.

If we are to tie immigration to Canada's labour market needs, it's important to engage all the relevant players, such as the provincial and territorial governments, local and regional governments, the business community and the higher education sector. Regional variations of in-demand skills are considerable, and a one-size-fits-all approach will disadvantage local economies.

We need stability in the ISP and to start the long and hard journey of rebuilding the trust and credibility of the Canadian education brand. We want to be partners in building a sustainable immigration system that serves the needs of the Canadian economy and society.

Thank you for your time. I look forward to your questions.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Mr. Agnew.

Next, we have Robert Asselin from U15.

[Translation]

Robert Asselin (Chief Executive Officer, U15 Canada): Madam Chair, members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today.

[English]

My name is Robert Asselin. I serve as CEO of U15 Canada, Canada's 15 leading research universities. Together, our institutions conduct more than 75% of all university research in Canada, enrol 70% of the country's full-time doctoral students and generate much of the nation's innovation, from patents to private sector research contracts. Collectively, our universities are a national strategic asset; they are anchors of talent, research and innovation.

- (1645)

[Translation]

International students, especially graduate and post-graduate students, are essential to that mission. They bring skills and ideas that make Canada more innovative and more productive, thereby strengthening both our economy and our communities.

International graduate and postgraduate students are a crucial pool of highly skilled talent. More than half of those who took a master's or doctorate in the 2000s became permanent residents of Canada within a decade.

Canada ranks just 25th among OECD countries for the proportion of graduate degrees awarded. We can't allow ourselves to turn away top talent.

[English]

We recognize that changes to immigration policies were necessary, but treating all international students with a one-size-fits-all approach has created uncertainty, damaged Canada's reputation and reduced international enrolment.

At U15 universities, the share of international students has been stable at 18%-20% since 2018. However, for the first time in decades, we're now seeing steep declines. First-year international bachelor enrolments have dropped 19%. Graduate and doctoral programs are also seeing major reductions, particularly in engineering, computer science, health and life sciences. These are precisely the fields that underpin Canada's future economy and security. In graduate computer engineering programs, enrolment has dropped by more than 20% in a single year. This is the talent we need to build nuclear reactors, advance AI supercomputing, and strengthen our defence industrial base.

Because graduate students play such a central role as research assistants, these declines are already eroding the capacity of Canada's research ecosystem to deliver the discoveries and innovations our society and businesses depend on. Including graduate students in study permit caps has weakened Canada's research capacity at the very moment when sovereignty and competitiveness demands the opposite. Even the Speech from the Throne emphasized the importance of attracting the best and the brightest.

We, therefore, recommend three steps: one, rebuild Canada's reputation by sending a clear signal that we welcome top global talent, including the timely processing of study permits; two, exempt graduate students from study permit caps; three, target bad actors while supporting institutions that uphold the highest standards through a distinctions-based approach that recognizes excellence.

In a world where ideas, talent and technology define prosperity and security, our ability to attract and retain the brightest minds will determine our future. If we send the wrong signal now, we risk losing a generation of talent to our competitors, and with it, the innovations in industry that will shape the 21st century. If we act with urgency and clarity, however, Canada can cement its reputation as a global destination for excellence in research and discovery.

This is not just about universities. It's about our economy and security. We must choose ambition.

[Translation]

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Asselin.

Our next witness is Mr. Blanchette from the University of Québec at Trois-Rivières.

Mr. Blanchette, you have the floor.

Christian Blanchette (President, University of Quebec at Trois-Rivieres): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I thank everyone who is with us today.

International students are essential to Canadian universities for both research, as others have mentioned, and to keep certain programs in a number of universities going.

The international student situation is a regional problem for which some have sought a national solution. This has resulted in tragedy for many of the country's universities.

I'd like to go over how responsibilities are shared among the major players in this file—universities, the federal government and the provincial government.

Universities are responsible for evaluating the quality of education that applicants have received. Provincial governments assess students' financial ability. The federal government looks at financial ability, but is fully responsible for security screening of applicants to ensure national security.

That said, universities take steps to maintain the integrity of the system. All universities have procedures in place to ensure that the documents they receive and review are genuine. Sometimes they go much further than that.

Case in point, the Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières, UQTR.

In 2021, we noticed an unusual situation with the number of applications from certain countries. We also observed a new phenomenon, an unusual number of applicants from certain countries withdrawing early in the semester.

That situation prompted me to write a letter to the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, the Honourable Sean Fraser, on November 17, 2021. In my letter, I indicated that we had noticed our admissions system could be used improperly to get around the usual official immigration rules and procedures. I invited him to take action by addressing this matter, and I assured him of our co-operation.

We've been co-operating with IRCC offices since 2022. We started using two-factor authentication two years before it was rolled out across Canada, and we validated the identity of visa holders with IRCC.

We also instituted other measures. There were unusual elements in applications we received from six countries in the spring of 2021, and we implemented user fees for those countries.

In October 2022, we added three more countries to the list, bringing the total number of targeted countries to nine. In 2021, we expanded that to all countries from which we were receiving applications. We saw a dramatic decline in the number of applications we received that seemed irregular, and suddenly agencies were no longer in the picture.

That said, new public policies limiting the number of international students have a detrimental effect on universities' ability to conduct research and provide quality education to their students.

Case in point, in April 2025, Quebec universities as a whole saw a 43% drop in the number of applications for admission. At UQTR, the number of applications dropped by 56%. We are currently compiling the data for September 2025, the semester that just started.

Every Quebec university is allowed to accept a limited percentage of international students. UQTR was only able to reach 36% of its limit. The figures I am seeing from the system as a whole indicate an average of around 35%.

Overall, in a single year, the number of international students enrolling in Quebec institutions has dropped by close to 20%. In addition, the administrative measures put in place to control the arrival of international students are causing significant processing delays for study permits, which is leading to a marked drop in enrollment.

International student recruitment is a competition for talent. The decline I just mentioned is a strong indication that Canada lost that competition in 2024. It lost again in 2025. This is bad for universities, and it is really bad for Canada's economic development.

I believe that the international student issue is not an immigration issue. It is, first and foremost, about university development, Canada's development, and research and economic development in Canada.

We need to send a strong signal if we want Canada to become a welcoming country again and if we want to approach the competition for talent in 2026 in a more welcoming manner.

• (1650)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Blanchette.

[English]

I want to thank all of you for your remarks. That was excellent.

I now invite Ms. Rempel Garner to begin our first round of questions.

You have six minutes.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner (Calgary Nose Hill, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

I'll direct my questions to you, Mr. Agnew. From 2021 to 2024, you guys took in over 50,000 international students. That's a lot. You opened a campus a few years ago. Then you had to shutter a campus. You attributed that to the loss of international student permits.

Did the federal government give you the impression that the level of permits you were receiving would go on indefinitely?

David Agnew: No, I don't think they gave us the impression that it would go on indefinitely. What we were responding to when we dedicated one of our campuses to international students was, frankly, the demand—the very high demand, as you note—for international education and—

• (1655)

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: I'm sorry. I don't have a lot of time.

I'm sure there was a demand, but there's a permitting process from the federal government. You must have known that you were dependent on that. Why did you persist? You must have been under the assumption that these numbers would carry on forever.

David Agnew: Nothing lasts forever. It was a campus that was available to us. Because of the demand, we decided to use that and put our capital to good use.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Thank you. It just seems like a pretty poor business choice to me.

Did the federal government ever ask you to demonstrate that there was adequate housing for the number of students you brought into the region? Just give a yes or a no.

David Agnew: No.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Did the federal government ever ask you to demonstrate that there were adequate numbers of jobs in the region for those 50,000 people? Just give a yes or a no.

David Agnew: No.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Did you ever raise any alarm bells with the federal government that there might be kids sleeping under a bridge, or food bank usage? Did you ever have that conversation with the federal government on the student permitting numbers you were having?

David Agnew: Well, as far as I know, we did not have any students sleeping under bridges, so that wasn't—

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: As far as you know.... Okay.

David Agnew: We have a housing office that works very closely with our students. Most of our students stay off campus, not on campus.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: You talked about the asylum claim rates and the fact that you didn't know about this. I'm assuming—just to re-emphasize that this was the case—that you didn't talk to the federal government about this and they weren't talking to you.

David Agnew: Prior to it appearing in the media, that's exactly right. Once it appeared in the media, we started talking.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: There's a lot of financial liability associated with international students who are making false asylum claims or overstaying their visas. Do you think institutions like yours should bear some responsibility or financial liability when that happens?

David Agnew: I would just remind you that we don't actually approve the permits. We assess our incoming students on the basis of their academic records and their transcripts.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: You sure profit off them, though. Isn't that right?

David Agnew: I don't use the word “profit”, because we're a public institution.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: I would.

David Agnew: Any surplus that we earn goes back into our institution for the good of our students. That's what happens to our surplus.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: It's interesting that you raise that, because I note that you're number 202 on the Ontario sunshine list. You make over \$450,000 a year. You're telling me that you never talked to the federal government about adequate housing for students in your area, that you never talked to them about potential asylum claims, which is a big cost to taxpayers, and that you never talked to them about youth unemployment rates. Do you think you deserve your salary?

David Agnew: We did talk about the asylum claims with IRCC once we were made aware through the media that we had a problem. As I said in my remarks, I very much wanted to sit down with the federal government to understand why this was happening.

I mean, I have some good news and some bad news. The good news is that the rate of asylum claims has plummeted this year. The bad news is that I have no idea why it went down, just as I had no idea why it went up.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: I don't know; maybe somebody on your board would have told you that if you brought fewer people in, they might make fewer asylum claims. Do you think that might be an obvious factor?

David Agnew: The numbers don't track just like you would say, actually. That's not exactly the way the numbers track.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: But how would you know?

David Agnew: Historically, the numbers are out. I mean—

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Okay. I'm going to move on to another topic here.

Earlier in testimony, one of my Liberal colleagues said that he was concerned about corrosive rhetoric and foreign students being scapegoated for things like the youth jobs crisis and high rental costs. I agree. I don't think foreign students should bear the brunt of that.

Who deserves the blame, you or the federal government?

David Agnew: When I look around my campus and reflect back on the years I've spent at Seneca, international students have been disproportionately the leaders of our student government. They've been representatives on our board of governors. They've contributed immensely.

I agree with you. I don't think we should be scapegoating international students either. As I said before—

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: I need to have the mic back now.

Do you think you bear any responsibility? You brought in 50,000 students. There were asylum claims, food bank overuse and high rental rates. Do you bear any responsibility for that decision?

David Agnew: We are a single institution. Our growth in international students was, I believe, responsible and responsive to the times. As I said, any surplus we generated during that time was invested back into our students.

• (1700)

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: I'll close with this. Every person on this panel today has said that they need more global talent to make Canada competitive. What about Canadian kids? What are you doing to make Canadian kids better? I have not heard a single academic institution today talk about how they are skilling kids in a youth jobs crisis. What are you doing about that?

David Agnew: We are busting our butt to recruit Canadian kids. We have great programs. We are trying as much as possible to direct them toward the STEM programs that the government says we need and that I agree we do need.

We're doing a lot to try to upskill and re-skill our Canadian kids and our Canadian workforce—not just the kids.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Do better.

David Agnew: Well, thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Agnew.

Thank you, Ms. Rempel Garner.

Now we go to Ms. Salma Zahid for six minutes.

Salma Zahid (Scarborough Centre—Don Valley East, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Thanks a lot to all our witnesses.

My first few questions are for Mr. Asselin, who is representing U15 Canada.

Mr. Asselin, U15 institutions operate across this country. From your perspective, how does the growth of international student involvement in Ontario compare with the other provinces? What risk has that posed for the reputation of Canada's international student program as a whole?

Robert Asselin: Thank you for the question.

I can only speak for my own institutions, the U15 institutions. As I said in my remarks, the business model of our institutions doesn't depend on international student inflows. Our numbers have been steady at around 18% to 20% since 2018.

I will also put on the table that what we provide, essentially, are pathways to academic excellence. Our institutions have the highest standards of academic excellence, and we're very proud of it.

Salma Zahid: Do you agree that federal concerns about Ontario's unchecked enrolment growth were legitimate, given that provinces like Quebec and British Columbia have taken stronger measures to regulate the designated learning institutions?

Robert Asselin: Again, I don't want to comment on one specific province. I want to speak on behalf of my institutions.

I think we have an excellent record of bringing the best and the brightest. We're very proud of the excellence that we provide to students. The programs that international students compete for to come into our institutions are of the highest standard.

I'll let others judge the Ontario situation as a whole.

Salma Zahid: Within your institutions across Canada, have you made no comparisons about the growth of the enrolment in different provinces?

Robert Asselin: Overall, we're among the most sought-after institutions in Canada. People want to come into our programs, at both the graduate and the undergraduate level. In some instances, it's very competitive to come and be accepted at places such as McGill, UBC or the University of Toronto.

It's not a quantitative argument. For us, it's a qualitative one. We're very proud of that, and we will maintain it.

Salma Zahid: Thank you.

Can you speak to the impact on the U15 universities, whose reputation depends on quality, when provinces such as Ontario allow the private colleges or the less regulated institutions to expand enrolment rapidly without sufficient oversight over those institutions?

Robert Asselin: Madam Chair, I hesitate to go outside my jurisdiction here. I'm here to represent the leading research universities of Canada and to say that the study permit cap has been very harmful to bringing the best and the brightest. That's my message today.

Thank you.

Salma Zahid: Looking at the international best practices, what role do you think the provinces should play in ensuring that the integrity of their designated learning institutions is protected?

Robert Asselin: Again, I think that the federal Parliament is concerned with federal jurisdiction. I want to emphasize that what we are able to change, hopefully through the recommendations of this committee, is to remove the cap on graduate student study permits, which has been very harmful to bringing the best and the brightest to this country. I hope that we will keep the emphasis on this, because it is the line in my testimony that I want to make sure everyone remembers.

Thank you.

• (1705)

Salma Zahid: My next question is for Mr. Agnew from Seneca Polytechnic.

Mr. Agnew, housing has been one of the most pressing challenges facing international students in Ontario. I am a member of Parliament from the city of Toronto. From Seneca's perspective, how has that challenge evolved in recent years, and how have the government's recent reforms, such as introducing the caps and requiring stronger provincial oversight, affected the pressure of housing on the students at Seneca?

David Agnew: There are fewer students. Therefore, there is less demand for student housing, which is not single-family dwellings being built in the suburbs of Toronto or the GTA. It's usually apartments and shared accommodation within the city.

We have two residences on our campuses. We've never housed the majority of our students, by any stretch. Both international and domestic students have chosen to live in the community, as opposed to on our campus. To help, we have a housing office. Students can do home stays. We can match up people who have an empty room in their house with a student. We do everything we can to support our students in the search for housing.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Zahid.

Thank you, Mr. Agnew.

Now we have six minutes for you, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I thank the witnesses for being here with us for this important study.

Mr. Blanchette, I'd like to talk about *Enquête's* investigative report into international crime rings that use the study permit system to get their people into Quebec. That episode caused quite a stir in Quebec. Viewership was record-setting. A lot of people watched it, including you and me.

I was shocked—or at least very surprised—at the IRCC spokesperson's response, which was to blame universities and the Government of Quebec.

What was your reaction to the IRCC's response to that report?

Christian Blanchette: As soon as we heard about the report, we made a point of watching it. I have to tell you I was surprised because universities have neither the means nor the power to conduct background checks. The federal government, that is, IRCC, has the power and the means to find out if applicants who want to come to Canada have a criminal record or other problems.

We are willing to co-operate with IRCC, and have been for four years, to help identify individuals that, according to the department, should not be in Canada and to find out if such people are actually here. We'll continue to do that as long as IRCC wants to work with us, but the department is the one with that power, not universities.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Mr. Blanchette.

You also talked about processing delays, research and universities' international reputations.

Can you say more about those things?

Christian Blanchette: Universities haven't changed how they recruit people. Obviously it was very surprising to see such a sharp drop in the number of applications at all kinds of universities. We've seen statements made by our politicians in the press around the world, and we can see what kind of impact that has had.

The day after a department issues a statement, it appears in North African countries and all the countries in the francophonie, among others. Processing times are now extremely long. As a result, many high-quality candidates, talented people at all kinds of universities find themselves without a study permit come September because there is too much red tape. There are ways to simplify the process, and the government really needs to work on shortening processing times.

I have an example for you, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

Doctoral studies in Canada take four years. Programs are designed to last four years. In general, candidates graduate after four and a half years of study. However, permits issued to international students for doctoral programs are valid for three years. That forces students to apply for a renewal, and that clogs up the system. That's not all. Applications for renewal are just like the initial IRCC permit application. Students are expected to produce documents and diplomas that are already in our universities' files. They've already produced all those documents. Moreover, it can sometimes be very difficult to get those documents in some countries.

Our system is cumbersome and unfit for its purpose. We should have an expedited process for applications for renewal. We need to look at the entire system and simplify it. Currently, its consequences are very negative, and talented people who were told they

can come to Canada aren't coming. Canada's reputation is suffering as a result.

● (1710)

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I've read a lot on the file. From what I understand, there is a difference between francophone and anglophone universities in terms of the consequences that certain decisions or statements have had recently.

Have you also noticed this difference, given what is happening in some anglophone educational institutions compared to our francophone educational institutions?

Christian Blanchette: Actually, the recruitment pools are different. Even the 2022 report of the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration pointed out the marked differences between the processing of files in English-language recruitment pools and the processing of files in French-language institutions. French-language recruitment pools were at a great disadvantage. I speak about this with first-hand knowledge, since 65% of our international students came from the African continent. We saw that as really unfavourable treatment.

Essentially, the francophonie reacts strongly to Canadian rhetoric. I think that's why we need to reflect and try to return to separating the issue of international students from the much more complex issue of immigration. Ideally, we should talk about international students separately from immigration, because that would send a clearer message to students.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Briefly, what is the impact on research?

I asked the other group of witnesses this question, but I'd also like to hear your comments.

Christian Blanchette: All universities have areas of research excellence, whether they are part of U15 Canada or other academic institutions. Approximately 80 universities in Canada have very large research programs. I am the chair of the Bureau de coopération interuniversitaire, and I speak to all university rectors. Across Quebec, we see that everyone in every area of cutting-edge research is having trouble recruiting talent.

I would like to point out that we are filling our universities with Canadian students in cutting-edge disciplines. However, we aren't managing to produce enough talent in areas like artificial intelligence or hydrogen technology. These are truly cutting-edge areas, and there isn't enough talent in Canada to meet the needs of Canadian-funded research.

That's why international students are important for Canada. It is Canada's research program and Canada's economic transformation program that are affected by the scarcity of international students.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Blanchette and Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

[*English*]

Next, we have Mr. Menegakis, for five minutes.

Costas Menegakis (Aurora—Oak Ridges—Richmond Hill, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to our witnesses.

My questions are for Mr. Agnew this afternoon.

Mr. Agnew, I want to confirm what you said earlier, at least my understanding of it. Did the federal government ever ask you take into consideration the availability of student housing around Seneca college campuses in the greater Toronto area, where you primarily have campuses?

David Agnew: No. Did the federal government ever come to me and ask, "Do you having housing around?" No, the federal government did not come to me.

Costas Menegakis: Did they ever ask you to take into consideration the labour market impacts, particularly among our youth, yes or no?

David Agnew: Can I just step back for a second? We're provincial organizations. Colleges in Ontario are Crown agencies, so I think the main connection—

Costas Menegakis: I understand, Mr. Agnew. I just wanted to know if the federal government ever asked you to take that into consideration.

Did they ever ask you to take into consideration the impact to our health care system with respect to the number of international students Seneca is accepting? Give a yes or a no, please.

David Agnew: We run our own health care service for our international students—

Costas Menegakis: No, did the federal government—

The Chair: Mr. Menegakis, please allow the witness to answer.

• (1715)

Costas Menegakis: Fine.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Agnew, please.

David Agnew: It would be the same answer. The federal government tends to deal with the provincial government—

Costas Menegakis: They did not.

David Agnew: —as opposed to directly with institutions. I would think that would be the answer.

Costas Menegakis: I noticed that the Seneca Student Federation has a food bank. Is that correct?

David Agnew: That's correct.

Costas Menegakis: Do you have the number of food bank users of Seneca Student Federation by year over the last five years, Mr. Agnew?

David Agnew: I would have to ask the federation. I certainly will provide you with that information.

Costas Menegakis: Thank you. If you could undertake to do that, it would be greatly appreciated.

Your website also notes that students must register to pick up food. Would it be possible to provide us with the number of international student visits to the food bank by year over the last five years?

David Agnew: Honestly, I don't know whether the registration system would ask students to identify themselves by their country of origin, but I can certainly ask the SSF for that information.

Costas Menegakis: You said earlier in testimony that you're busting your butt to attract Canadians to Seneca, but we noticed that you're investing in two campuses in the Cairo region. You're an Ontario college, meant to be educating Ontarians. Why are you focusing on educating Egyptians?

David Agnew: We're not investing in those campuses. They're being built for us by somebody else. Not one cent of our capital is going into those campuses. We're operating them. Why? As I think is apparent to everybody in Canada, we need revenue, and this is a way of raising additional revenue that we can then bring home to invest in our campuses for the benefit of our students in Canada. That's what we do.

Costas Menegakis: According to your annual report, 53% of your student body were international students. Don't you think those shops should be going to Canadian students?

David Agnew: We do not turn away domestic students. We try to recruit in our programs all the time. Please understand that it's a very competitive market. We're in the GTA, where we have eight different post-secondary institutions. We have a big recruitment team. We do a lot of marketing, which you've probably seen around the city. We are trying our very best to recruit as many domestic students as we possibly can.

Costas Menegakis: Mr. Agnew, as a primary educational institution in the greater Toronto area, certainly you must take into consideration—or should be taking into consideration—what happens when these international students come into the city. Are you aware that some of them are living under bridges? Are you aware that they're going to food banks? Are you aware that the youth unemployment in the greater Toronto area is hovering around 20% at this time? Do you not feel a responsibility to at least take those issues up with the IRCC when discussing things with them?

David Agnew: These are all very serious issues. We do our best to do what we can for the students we have under our responsibility. We are an institution in a big city, so we can't solve the housing problems. We were planning to build a new residence to attract more students into that residence, but of course, January 24 came along, and because our student numbers are dropping now, that doesn't make economic sense.

You have to understand—and this is, I think, a pretty strong narrative across the post-secondary system—that the revenue we were raising from international students was helping our domestic students. It was cross-subsidizing programs. It was helping to keep some of those programs alive. When people talk to you about the hundreds of programs that are closing, it's because—

Costas Menegakis: Well, 53% of your revenue, Mr. Agnew, according to your annual report—

The Chair: Please let him finish, Mr. Menegakis.

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Madam Chair, I have a point of order. The interpretation service sent a note saying that the sound isn't good enough for interpretation.

Madam Chair, our wonderful interpreters are saying that, when a microphone is turned on in the room at the same time as the witness's microphone, it becomes very difficult for them to interpret what is being said.

We know we must protect their hearing. There have been some recent incidents of acoustic shock. We don't want that to happen. The health and safety of parliamentary employees, including our fabulous interpreters, is most important to us.

The Chair: Thank you.

[English]

Thank you for clarifying that. I do note that.

Mr. Agnew, do you want to finish your sentence?

I'll allow you to finish your sentence as well, Mr. Menegakis.

Mr. Agnew, you were finishing your sentence. Go ahead, please.

David Agnew: I was just saying that among the many hundreds of programs that have closed in the last year, some of them have closed because they've lost the cross-subsidization or even the bodies, the enrolment, that they needed to sustain them. That's part of the role that international students have played. It has helped domestic students.

• (1720)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Menegakis, you have just a final 10 seconds.

Costas Menegakis: Mr. Agnew, 53% of your revenue is coming from students who are not Canadians. It's from international students, according to your annual report. One can easily question the motive, whether your intent is really to subsidize or assist the remaining 47%, who are Canadians. You are a Canadian educational institution.

David Agnew: Why would you question that?

The Chair: Thank you so much, Mr. Menegakis.

Thank you, Mr. Agnew.

Next, we have five minutes for Ms. Sodhi.

Amandeep Sodhi (Brampton Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

First and foremost, I want to thank the three of you for being here today and for taking the time out of your busy schedules to meet with us.

I would like to frame my first set of questions around the role of provinces and immigration, and in particular around international student enrolment.

My questions are for you, Mr. Agnew.

How important has the lack of provincial government funding been in influencing the rapid growth of international student enrolment over the past few years?

David Agnew: I don't think the financial challenges of the post-secondary system, particularly in Ontario, are a mystery to anybody. Obviously, one of the responses was to try to ensure our survival, frankly. That coincided with a very aggressive set of immigration targets that were set by the federal government. We were really out there co-recruiting with the federal government. There's a video that you can still find on the IRCC website that says, "Study—Explore—Work—Stay". It's an appeal to international students to come. That was also being pushed from that area.

It was happening in two ways. We need more financial resources. I don't think it's any mystery. There's been a financial tuition freeze in Ontario for some time now. It's an old financial model, which is being looked at by the provincial government, very gratefully. At the same time, there were very aggressive immigration targets being set. The two came together at the same time.

Amandeep Sodhi: Thank you for your answer.

I'll move on to my second question. Do you believe that there were any early warning signs that the provincial government should have either responded to or engaged with, regarding housing availability, student well-being and/or institutional capacity?

David Agnew: I'm not sure I understand about institutional capacity. I don't quite understand what you mean by that.

I'm not in government. I don't have the policy levers. I don't have the analytics, statistics and data to understand how early those things could be felt. I know that people were talking about a housing price increase that was out of control in Toronto, for instance, and in some other cities. If you look at the data, that actually mostly predated the big uptick in international student populations.

Amandeep Sodhi: Thank you, once again.

My next question is for Mr. Asselin.

How have your institutions adapted to the recent changes in international student policies, including the cap and financial requirements?

Robert Asselin: Thank you for the question.

Obviously, what I wanted to lay out today was not that our U15 universities are struggling financially as a result of this. I wanted to lay out very clearly in front of this committee that we're handicapping Canada's economic future by targeting graduate students the way we have done with these changes. It's been very harmful. I think our institutions will be fine. We'll keep the highest standard of excellence going forward. I'm very proud of the role that we play in Canadian society.

The issue for this committee is really to think about immigration policy, the international student study permit cap and how it relates to graduate students.

Amandeep Sodhi: Thank you.

My second question for you is this. In your opinion, how do you think these reforms might be able to reduce the exploitation risk associated with some private colleges and unfair recruitment practices?

• (1725)

Robert Asselin: Again, I'm afraid this is outside my wheelhouse. I'm not here to talk about colleges. I'm not an expert on colleges. I don't have a line of sight into what colleges do. I will leave it to others to comment on that.

Amandeep Sodhi: I'll ask this very quickly, because I know we have 20 seconds left.

Do you believe that the international student cap will enhance Canada's global reputation as a destination for well-supported international education?

Robert Asselin: I believe it has handicapped our reputation very gravely, unfortunately. When my university presidents travel abroad, it's clear that the message we have sent is very negative: "Don't come to Canada; we don't want you here." It's very harmful.

It's going to take some time, by the way, to re-establish this. This is why reforms are so urgent, in my opinion.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Sodhi.

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I would be remiss if I didn't mention the fact that the Liberals' strategy is rather amusing, because they are talking about provincial politics, when this motion concerns a federal program.

Mr. Blanchette, don't you think it's problematic for the federal government to implement measures affecting all regions without taking into account the different regional and linguistic realities?

Christian Blanchette: There is no doubt that a number of regions in Canada were surprised.

I'll give you some statistics specific to Quebec. In 2018, there were 314,000 international and domestic students in the Quebec university system. In 2022, there were 316,000 students, and in 2025, we're at 318,000 students.

There hasn't been a massive explosion in the number of students. Housing is a major issue in some regions. In Quebec, there are essentially 12 university towns, if we include the cities around Montreal. In most cases, Quebec, Canadian and international students migrate to these cities. At UQTR, two thirds of our students do not come from the city or region of Trois-Rivières. They come from elsewhere in Quebec and around the world.

For us, the housing issue is important. We have never had difficulty in finding housing for our students, even when there was a shortage. However, we increased the number of student housing units in 2014 by 44% by establishing partnerships.

We're making a major effort because people are saying in the public sphere that universities are creating the housing problem. That may be true in some places, but I don't see it in most Quebec cities. We really need to look at this situation by looking at the real data on housing.

The housing shortage problem exists everywhere. I lived in Toronto for 13 years, and I can tell you that there was a housing shortage in Toronto in 1985.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Madam Chair, is my time up?

The Chair: You have only eight seconds.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: In that case, I would like to thank all the witnesses for coming here for this important study.

We're going to compile all their testimony and all their recommendations with the help of our fabulous analysts.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

[*English*]

Because we've run out of time, if it's okay, I'm going to give two minutes to Mr. Davies and two minutes to Mr. Zuberi.

Go ahead, Mr. Davies.

Fred Davies: Thank you, Madam Chair. I'll be very brief.

I want to follow up on what my colleague pointed to today, to sort of wrap this up with a little bow.

Mr. Agnew, you have built a college campus in Cairo. You made reference to the need to bring revenue back to Canada. That concerns me, particularly when 53% of your student population is international students. To me, this looks like a bit of a cash cow. You have taken an educational model and turned it into an entrepreneurial model.

I'm interested to know, do you have a remuneration package that has performance bonuses based on revenue?

David Agnew: No.

One of the things I've noticed as I've travelled around the world is that many countries actually encourage their institutions to export their excellent, quality education. You see many—

• (1730)

Fred Davies: I'm sorry. I don't have much time here, sir.

David Agnew: Just to clarify, we're not building the campus. I've already made that point. We're not putting one cent of capital into that campus.

Fred Davies: You made reference to the fact that this revenue does come back to Canada to fund programs in Canada, which are 53% taken in by international students. To me, you've taken a model of the free-flowing, open-ended access to foreign students and you've built campuses around that flawed business model, and the consequences are now coming home to the reality that the tap has been turned off.

Do you know whether there are any other campuses that have as high a level of international students as your institution?

David Agnew: I'm not going to respond on behalf of other institutions, but I'd be happy to sit down with you, Mr. Davies—

Fred Davies: Are you saying you don't know?

David Agnew: I'd be happy to sit down with you, Mr. Davies. I'm responsible for my institution, not everybody else's. I'd be happy to sit down with you and explain our business model and our strategic plan. It's not a cash grab. It's trying to make sure that our domestic students have great programs and great careers. That's what we're all about.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Mr. Davies.

Thank you, Mr. Agnew.

You have two minutes, Mr. Zuberi.

Sameer Zuberi: Thank you.

I'd like to stick with Mr. Agnew.

Given that we've been talking a lot about domestic students, do you want to share with us what your institution has done to source domestic students and to promote domestic recruitment?

David Agnew: We have a huge.... Well, it's not huge, but we have many people on our domestic recruitment team. We have a large marketing budget. We work very closely with all the regional high schools that would feed into our campuses. We go to adult learning centres. We do everything we possibly can. We love the school college work program, because it brings high school students onto our campuses so they can earn a high school credit and a college credit at the same time.

We work very hard because, as I said before, Toronto is a very competitive market and we have a lot of great institutions. We're doing our very best to make sure we continue to recruit great domestic students.

Sameer Zuberi: I just want to ask all the witnesses an open question.

In terms of lessons that we can draw from international student programs in other countries, do you have suggestions on best practices that we can adopt from other countries when it comes to international student programs and recruitment?

David Agnew: I think it was Mr. Asselin who talked about the competition out there in international education land. What's interesting is that it's no longer just the U.K. and Australia. There are countries throughout the world that are positioning themselves as international education hubs.

I'm worried that Canada is going in a different direction. Yes, as much as we need graduate-level talent, we need undergraduate-level talent as well. I think we really have to get back into that world. As others have said, we have to start the long journey of rebuilding our Canada brand.

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